

The Influence of Target Age on Bystander Helping Behavior

An Honors Thesis (HONORS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Mary E. Kite". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized "M" and "K".

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Abstract

Previous studies have examined the topics of helping behavior and ageism separately; however, the effect of ageism on helping behavior is a topic that has received little attention. The current study examined whether bystanders were more likely to offer aid to a young, middle, or older adult confederate. The behaviors measured were whether or not the bystander would pick up an object dropped by the confederate or would inform her that she had dropped the item. If help was offered, the experimenter also measured the amount of time that lapsed before the bystander offered help to the confederate. The hypothesis was that the bystanders would be more inclined to offer aid to the older confederate and that the help would be offered more quickly to that person. Results did not support the hypothesis; no significant difference emerged in help offered to younger or older confederates.

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The Influence of Age on Bystander Helpfulness

Many researchers have attempted to determine the reasoning behind human tendencies towards prosocial behavior. What makes people willing or unwilling to turn their attention towards another individual in need? A popular theory that has been put forth to answer this question is the cost versus reward model (Piliavin, Piliavin, & Rodin, 1969). According to this model, how a bystander perceives an individual in need of aid can influence their likelihood of offering help. However, stereotypes and attitudes that direct people's actions towards the older population, labeled ageism, might also have an impact upon the amount of help offered towards group members. This paper explores whether helping is affected by these beliefs.

Cost-Versus-Reward Model

Piliavin, Piliavin, and Rodin's (1969) model focuses on the internal emotional turmoil witnesses experience when they encounter a situation in which another individual requires aid. The idea within this model is that helping another individual decreases the emotional stress the bystander experiences as a result of encountering a situation in which help is clearly needed. However, the lessening of the internal emotional excitement is not the only factor that influences a bystander's willingness to help or the manner in which they offer aid. According to the model, people also weigh the possible costs and rewards of helping and these factors are encompassed by a common formula that explains how individuals decide whether or not to offer aid within a specific situation. Specifically, this formula is a basic cost versus reward comparison, focusing on the possible costs of inaction and of helping out the victim of the unfortunate circumstance and the rewards that could be obtained through action or withdrawal from the situation. For example, in a situation where a stranger asks a bystander for some gas money to fill up their car in order to get home, the bystander would weigh the costs of helping the stranger such as the loss

of money against the rewards of helping such as a positive feeling from performing a beneficial act for another individual. If the bystander determines that the costs outweigh the rewards, he or she is less likely to offer aid to the stranger, compared to when the rewards are perceived to be greater than the costs.

Results of an experiment testing the effects the presence of blood had upon bystander helpfulness supported this theory. The situation created was that a confederate collapsed on a subway car; in some instances the collapsed person had blood running out of his mouth and in other instances the confederate fell without the release of any blood. Observers stationed nearby recorded the demographic data of the individuals present, especially the bystander who offered aid to the individual. The observers also recorded the number of seconds that passed before the aid was given. Results demonstrated that the bystanders were more reluctant to offer aid in a timely manner when the individual who collapsed was bleeding; only 30% of the bystanders offered help in less than 12 seconds for the bleeding confederate compared to 70% of the bystanders for the confederate without visible blood. The reason the researchers believed this pattern occurred was that the blood added to the costs of the situation because it increased the chances that the individual would have to get “dirty” to help and because it takes more time to help a bleeding person than someone who has simply fainted or passed out (Piliavin & Piliavin, 1972). As predicted by the cost-reward model, the bystanders were more willing to help the individual in need when it cost them less to provide the aid.

However, not all psychologists hold the same views about the cost-versus-reward theory. Kerber (1984), for example, demonstrated that an individual’s perception of the same costs and rewards within a given situation differed depending upon their altruistic nature. Specifically, more altruistic people saw situations as having more rewards and fewer costs than did less

altruistic people. Therefore, psychologists must look not only at situational factors in a helping situation, but must also examine the characteristics of the individuals being asked to help.

Stereotypes about Those Needing Help

People's perception of the costs and rewards of a helping situation are influenced by stereotypes associated with the individual in need of aid. If people have stereotypic beliefs about a social group, for example, these beliefs may influence their willingness to help. Research has shown that the cost-reward model can explain the difference in help offered to Black and White individuals. According to this theory, an increase in the cost of the prosocial behavior in a situation leads to more discrimination being directed toward the Black individuals seeking aid. One belief as to why this phenomenon exists is that bystanders perceive a situation in which a Black individual requires aid as being less arousing than if a White person was seen within the situation; therefore the bystander may be less incited to provide help. In a review of a set of studies on the effects of stereotyping on helpful behavior, researchers showed that Black individuals were especially unlikely to receive the same amount of help as their White counterparts in a situation in which there were low costs for helping an individual and high costs for not helping the person. However, when the costs of helping were higher Black individuals received less aid than their White peers (Saucier, Miller, & Doucet, 2005). These findings suggest that, in most situations with high costs for helping or not helping, a Black individual will experience more discrimination compared to an identical situation involving a White individual. These results may have emerged because the potential helpers' negative beliefs about Blacks affected their perception of the costs associated with offering their help. In this instance the bystanders' more negative view of Black individuals resulted in their perception that the costs of

a situation were lower if a Black person is in need of help than if a White person needed aid, even though the situations were the same for both individuals.

Ageism

African Americans are not the only group to suffer through negative stereotypes that can impact their likelihood of receiving aid. Older adults are also often faced with discrimination due to negative beliefs about their abilities. Older individuals are considered to be incompetent, but warm and are often placed within the same competence level as individuals with mental and physical disabilities, for example (Cuddy, Norton, & Fiske, 2005). Moreover, the incompetent label has been shown to be a relatively stable feature associated with older individuals; however, the warm adjective is only applied if the individual is behaving in a manner in accord with the older adult stereotype. Researchers have examined the effects of attempting to alter the stereotypical views concerning the older population. These results suggest that older adults who are seen as more mentally competent are also seen as colder individuals. In contrast, competence ratings do not vary by warm/cold judgments, indicating that the raters still perceive the older individual to hold the same level of competency regardless of the situation in which they observe the older individual. More generally, older adults are evaluated more negatively and are seen as less attractive than younger adults (Kite, Stockdale, Whitley, & Johnson, 2005).

Although people hold global beliefs about older adults, researchers also acknowledge that the term “older adult” is a broad category which encompasses many smaller subgroups. The stereotypes associated with the varying subcategories are different from one another as each subcategory is associated with different traits and features. Schmidt and Boland (1986) examined the subcategories of the “older adult” population by asking participants to list phrases and words commonly associated with older adults; another group of participants utilized these

lists to create a listing of qualities that described the particular subgroup of older individuals. Finally, attitudes towards these subtypes were rated by a third group. Results revealed that groupings of traits were created by the participants that related to specific stereotypes directed towards older individuals, such as the nosy neighbor or the perfect grandparent. Also, more negative than positive stereotypical subgroups were identified within this study.

Despite the existence of these subtypes, certain common negative attitudes still appear to influence the probability that help will be forthcoming within certain situations. The incompetent label that is persistently applied to the older adult population can lead to negative outcomes for this population when it impacts other individuals' feelings and behaviors towards that group in a non-supportive manner. This is problematic because many individuals who are perceived as incompetent but warm invoke a sense of pity from many bystanders (Cuddy et al., 2005). Although a degree of pity can be beneficial in assuring that individuals who might need some extra aid will receive it, the danger is that the sense of pity becomes overwhelming, leading bystanders to treat the stereotyped individual as if they cannot do anything for themselves. Individuals who experience this feeling of a complete loss of control can suffer from learned helplessness. The idea of learned helplessness is that the individual internalizes the notion that they are incapable of accomplishing tasks on their own; therefore, they stop trying and instead rely upon others to take care of them (Seligman, 1975).

Over-helping Behavior

The negative effect of learned helplessness on older individuals was supported by Karuza, Zevon, Gleason, Karuza, and Nash (1990). In their study, Karuza et al. surveyed college undergraduate students and older individuals who were attending a function at a local senior citizen center. The surveys examined the people's perceived level of responsibility for the cause

and solution for their problems. Rates also reported the participants' overall well-being. The results confirmed the idea that individuals, especially older adults, are mentally healthier if they feel that they are responsible for finding the solution to their own problems rather than having to wait for someone else to fix the problem for them. Even so, older participants seemed to favor the medical model for helping behavior more than the younger participants; this model asserts that individuals are not responsible for the introduction of the problem or for finding a solution to it (Karuza et al., 1990). This inconsistency supports the notion of learned helplessness in that once individuals have determined that they have no control over the events of their life, they start to believe that they will not be able to affect the outcome of their life. Instead, these people will wait for the interference of some outside force to address their problems.

Based on these previous research findings and theories, the hypothesis for the current observational study is that the older confederate will receive more help than the middle age and young adult confederates. The older confederate is the subject of many stereotypes, such as being mentally less competent than the younger confederates, and I expect this will encourage the bystanders to decide that the subject requires their help within the manufactured situation (Cuddy et al., 2005). Due to these stereotypes, the bystanders will be more motivated to offer aid to the older confederate though the cost of not helping the individual is relatively low, because of the belief that the older individual cannot correct the situation without some outside help. Individuals may also believe that older individuals are less responsible for finding a solution to their problems (Karuza et al., 1990).

Method

Participants

The participants were individuals shopping at the County Market, a community grocery store in a small Midwestern town, during the period when the field study was being performed. All participants were unaware that they were part of a research study. Two groups were studied, the first of which was individuals shopping within the store aisles and the second consisting of people walking out of the grocery store after they had finished shopping. A total of 60 shoppers were observed between the two sample groups, equally divided between the two groups with 30 shoppers being observed within each scenario.

Rating Sheet

Two raters recorded the actions of every individual participant on a rating sheet. The raters noted the participant's approximate age, gender, the time that lapsed before help was offered, and a brief description of the situation, such as specifying whether the confederate dropped an item or a sack. Information concerning the helpful behavior of the bystander was recorded using a brief checklist, consisting of Yes or No boxes that indicated whether or not help had been offered by the participant and Verbal or Physical boxes to demonstrate what type of help was given.

Procedure

The field study utilized three female confederates -- a young adult (19 years old), a middle-age adult (51 years old), and an older adult (79 years old). Certain actions were taken to help control for extraneous variables, such as attraction and femininity, which could have affected a bystanders' willingness to offer help. To control for these possible variables, the confederates were all women from the same family, who would therefore have similar genetically determined traits. Also, the confederates all wore winter coats along with a pair of blue jeans. Each of the confederates was assigned to independently perform two predetermined

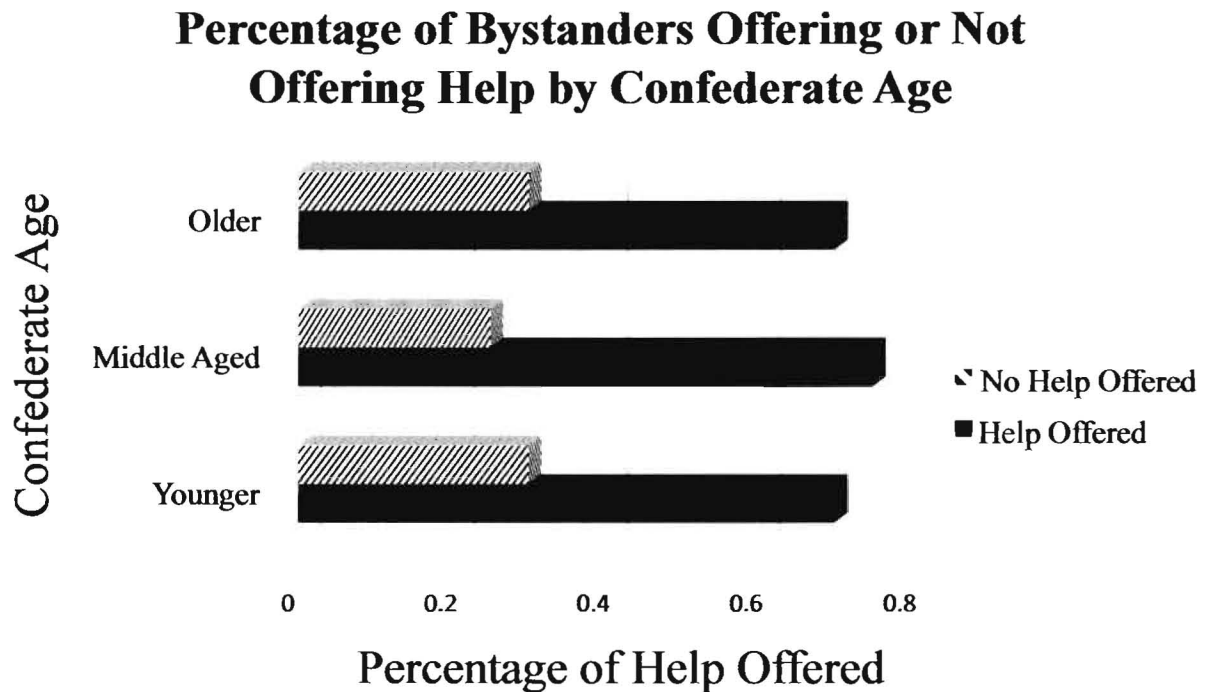
incidents within County Market. The first predetermined incident was that the confederate accidentally knocked an item out of their shopping basket while walking down the aisle. After dropping the item, the confederate feigned ignorance of the accident and continued walking down the aisle, as if looking for another item. Another individual followed at a distance behind the confederate to pick up the dropped item if no helpful behavior was displayed by the bystander. The second incident was dropping a shopping bag while exiting the store. The confederate continued walking towards a car in the parking lot, pretending that they had no knowledge of the missing sack. Again another individual followed at a safe distance to ensure that the sack could be retrieved if the bystander refused to offer help. During both of these predetermined incidents, two independent raters were within the general vicinity to record the information necessary to complete the rating sheet. The raters were as discrete as possible during their observations, acting as fellow shoppers during Incident One and sitting in a vehicle pretending to wait on someone coming out of the store during Incident Two, so as not to attract attention to the constructed nature of the scenes. After the field study was completed, the rating sheets were compared for inter-rater reliability; the raters agreed on 100% of the trials.

Results

It was hypothesized that bystanders would offer more aid to older individuals in comparison to the middle aged and younger adults due to the stereotypes and tendency towards overly helpful behavior focusing on older adults that is seen within today's society. The results of a Chi-square analysis did not support this prediction. Whether help was offered or not did not differ significantly between the three groups (see Figure 1); 70% of the bystanders offered help to the older confederate, compared with 70% for the young confederate and 75% for the middle

aged confederate, $\chi^2(2, N=60)=.16, ns$. These results suggest that the helpful behavior of bystanders is not affected by the age of an individual.

Figure 1: Bystander's Response to Confederate's Accident



For those participants who offered help, I examined whether helping differed depending on what type of aid was given. Results of a Chi-square analysis showed no significant difference; 40.0% of the bystanders offered physical help to the older confederate, while 40% offered physical aid to the young confederate and 50% offered to the middle aged confederate, $\chi^2(2, N=60)=1.60, ns$. Similarly, the Chi-square analysis of the results of the bystanders who offered verbal help did not differ significantly between the three groups; 40% of the bystanders were recorded offering verbal help to the older confederate, compared with 50% offering verbal help to the young confederate and 45% offering to the middle aged confederate, $\chi^2(2, N=60)=.404, ns$. These results suggest that the type of help offered by a bystander is not influenced by the age of the individual needing help.

Discussion

Previous research has indicated that individuals hold specific stereotypes regarding older adults that could lead to a higher likelihood that older people would be offered help within the given situation (Cuddy et al., 2005; Karuza et al., 1990). Based on this research, I expected that more bystanders would offer aid to the older adult confederate. However, the results of the current study showed no significant difference between the aid offered to the older confederates and either the young or middle aged confederates. In the supermarket setting that was used for this study, people appeared to be responding to other social norms, such as a general desire to help people, rather than a stereotypic belief that older adults needed help.

The results of this observational study suggest that confederate age did not have a direct impact on the bystander's helping as no significant difference was seen between the reactions of the individuals who witnessed an older, middle-aged, or young adult dropping an item. Rather, 43 out of all of the 60 (71.67%) bystanders offered aid to the individual who experienced the accident regardless of the individual's age. These findings could have many implications concerning polite behaviors overall, signifying that helpful behavior within certain contexts is a norm that is not readily altered by external forces. The context in which the behavior was observed may have nullified any effects due to confederate age. The reasoning behind this assertion is that the experiment was held within a small, rural grocery store. Steblay (1987) examined 65 previously conducted experimental tests that compared the helpful behaviors in rural and urban settings. The results of her meta-analysis demonstrated that more help was given within a rural setting. Steblay also analyzed whether the results of the previous studies were comparing individual or situational factors influencing the helping behavior. An individual factor would be whether the participants grew up in a rural versus urban area, while a situational

influence would be where the experiment was conducted. Results supported the notion that the difference in helpful behavior is based upon contextual influences rather than personal ones. Kite et al. (2005), also found that contextual information outweighed negative beliefs about older adults.

That the current experiment was conducted in a rural setting could have influenced the experiment in a number of ways. For instance, people living in rural areas tend to live their day to day lives at a slower pace than people in a larger city because the congestion of the larger population within a given area makes it more difficult to quickly travel from one location to another. This might have influenced the results of the experiment because the individuals had more leisure time to devote to the prosocial act of helping another person. Within this context, the costs-versus-reward ratio for providing the helpful behavior is lower. According to the cost-versus-reward model, individuals determine whether or not to offer aid within certain circumstances by weighing the costs, such as lost time or shame, and rewards, such as gratitude, that would occur as a result of their actions or inactions within the situation (Piliavin et al., 1969). The cost could be higher in an urban setting due to the value placed upon an individual's time; in an urban setting, people spend more time waiting in lines to pay and also driving to and from the store, for example. It is possible, then, that differences due to confederate age might have emerged in an urban grocery store. Another reason that the rural setting may have encouraged more overall helpful behavior is the persona that is associated with living in smaller towns. While the town used in this observational study was large enough that people do not necessarily know one another by sight, it is small enough to have a small town atmosphere where everyone watches out for each other because of the close knit nature of the community.

Several aspects of this observational study could have limited the generalizability of the study results. The first limitation was the use of only one setting for data collection. All of the observational trials were held in the same small town grocery store, which does not allow for inferences to be drawn in regards to the impact the location had upon the likelihood that the participants would offer aid to the confederates. It is possible that this setting in some manner encourages prosocial behaviors; if so that participants' actions in the current study might not hold if the study had been conducted in a different location, such as airport terminal. Another limitation is the potential lack of variability in the participants' demographics. As was previously mentioned, it is possible that only certain types of individuals shop at a small town grocery store and, if so, these individuals might possess a certain tendency towards helpful behaviors that might not be prevalent within the general population. The final limitation that interconnects with the previously mentioned concerns is that all of the observations took place at the same time. This fact places even greater constraints on the participants' variability, because the sample was limited to the individuals who choose to shop not only at the certain store but also within a specific time frame. These factors influenced the external validity of the experiment by influencing the robustness or conceptual replicability of the results gathered during the study. According to Lynch (1982) the issue of robustness focuses on whether the relationship between the independent and dependent variables discovered within a study would continue to be supported if the setting, subjects, or time were altered.

An interesting unforeseen outcome of the experiment was that many participants who helped the middle-aged confederate also commented that "Don't want to lose this. You worked hard for it." This comment was not reported by the other confederates. This suggests that although age did not affect willingness to help, motivations for helping might have been different

across the experimental conditions. It would be interesting to explore this possibility in future research, perhaps by asking bystanders who helped to complete a short questionnaire that explored their reasons for offering aid. It might also be possible to create scenarios that tapped into people's different motivations for helping; for example, people might be more likely to help a person who appears to be employed in a low wage-earning job compared to a high wage-earning job.

In general, the results of the experiment indicate that when it is easy to offer help, a high percentage of the people do so, regardless of the age of the individual requiring the aid. Hopefully by further examining the contexts in which helpful behaviors differ from one another, researchers will develop a better understanding of the external factors that can influence our likelihood of demonstrating prosocial behaviors. By advertising the knowledge of which factors can lead to an increase or decrease of helpful behaviors, perhaps psychologists can open people's eyes to work towards increasing the likelihood of aid being offered in given situations. This study did not show significant differences concerning the varying age groups; however, it did provide some valuable information and hopefully will entice a continuance of exploration within this field, so that a better understanding of such a positive aspect of human social interaction can arise.

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